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CAN WE THE PEOPLE SOLVE OUR PROBLEMS?

by

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The day when the American people could live alone has come to an end. The hope of solving our national problems in peaceful isolation has departed with it.

By the advances we have made in transportation and communication, we have so shrunk our planet that we have become close neighbors with our world's other nations. We have established increasingly binding ties with them and we have helped to create numerous pathways of mutual interdependence.

Besieging our thoughts today are economic and social issues too complex to be solved by any one of the nations acting alone, so clearly are they a manifestation of world-wide maladjustments. Problems of unemployment, health, industrial and agricultural production, social and economic justice--these are samples of dislocations in a world system of living. As they are sprung from a world system, so they can be solved in terms, not of one nation, but of that same world. Whether these problems are to be faced honestly by our nation will depend upon the disposition of us who are its people.

WHAT DECISIONS WILL THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE TO MAKE?

In a world at war such problems cannot be solved; reason does not hold sway in the midst of national stubbornness and conflict. At war's end, we shall be living in the same interdependent world, these troubles will still be with us, and the need for solutions will still be pressing. The people of our nation will still have to determine the kind of international living arrangements we want to see established. We shall still have to decide upon active participation in building a new world order or resign ourselves to the unreality and futility of trying to live alone. We shall still be forced to inquire as to whether our own pursuit of happiness is possible in the absence of world-wide social adjustments.

As important as these decisions themselves will be the method by which they are reached.

Shall we the people wait until a few leaders furnish us their answers to our questions, or shall we think these things out for ourselves? Is it possible for people in a democracy to arrive at solutions to their problems by their own efforts and then put their solutions into practice? Will the choice of methods we use in trying to solve these problems have a bearing on the results we may obtain? Finally, will deliberate thinking by the people themselves furnish solutions more satisfying than those solutions we obtain by waiting for others to form conclusions for us?

WHY IS THE QUESTION OF METHOD IMPORTANT?

The vision of a new world order actually means the establishment of new objectives in living together. Individual security, social justice, and world-wide community cooperation are offered as substitutes for privation, want, group selfishness, and warfare.

The attainment of a new world order will not come through the mere decision that one set of values is preferable to another. While no living man knows how it will be accomplished, it is plain that its achievement depends upon our ability to go about its creation deliberately.

The establishment of a new world order will require that we consider new methods in education and in problem-solving by the people themselves. Some time-worn and traditional methods of procedure will doubtless have to be discarded, and new ones evolved. This will not be easy: many persons who study problems of world order will admit the failure of some past methods they have used; few give attention to experimental attempts to find effective substitutes.

The possibility of achieving a new world order obviously rests upon the ability of people generally to comprehend what such an order will mean to them and to understand that they can build it. The method we use must therefore grow out of the content of our own problems, and increasingly enable us to help ourselves toward broader understanding of our needs and our powers. In brief, we the people must teach ourselves to think on these things.

Until it becomes clear that oratory, preachments, and the preparation of voluminous material are not an effective substitute for real thinking by the people who will join in making decisions, we will not progress in achieving the new ways of living so desirable to our nation and our world. We the American people will not sense the possibility of solving community or national issues unless we ourselves think through the relationships between our problems and the difficulties of other peoples in our world.

HOW CAN WE DEVISE MORE EFFECTIVE METHODS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING?

If the attainment of world orderliness depends upon our ability to think through our problems, what methods shall we devise for educating ourselves toward satisfying action?

No method of education can be effective unless it grows out of the conscious needs of us who are to be educated. If we do not understand how we who are the people think and why we react as we do, it is futile to seek support for an ideal which we may not even understand. In devising educational methods, therefore, we shall have to consider both the ways in which we learn to think and our democratic ideal which requires that we do think.

Any program requiring popular understanding of its objectives cannot be expected to gain support unless its advocates consciously take into account the ways in which people themselves react and behave in the light of problems facing them. In brief, why do we think as we do?

WHERE DO WE GET OUR OPINIONS?

Like the children we rear, we men and women are products of our own experiences. Our convictions, our outlook on our problems, and our interests are the direct result of these experiences. Our world revolves within these limitations, and we interpret each new issue which confronts us in terms that we have come to understand.

The limiting influence of our experiences in situations where thinking is required is not the sole difficulty we face in trying to solve our problems. Equally important is the fact that these experiences limit also the interests we have. Men and women are concerned about what they understand and about what they have experienced and are experiencing in their daily efforts to maintain existence. It is hard to achieve interest in something we have never before known to exist. Advocates of "programs" are well aware of these human limitations.

HOW ARE CHANGES IN OPINION CREATED?

People must change their own opinions; no person can learn for another. New ways of thinking and new opinions occur only when a person understands that the older idea he was using falls short of solving a problem now existing. Learning is therefore a process of activity by the learner, and until this activity occurs, learning does not take place.

In effect, we change our opinions when we come to understand that our past conclusions are not tenable in the light of the real issues we face. Learning begins, therefore, where new problems are sensed, old opinions discarded, and the search for adequate conclusions begun. In the realm of international relations, the people of America will give no support to "cures" for ailments unless they first understand the ailments themselves. It is here that much of our education has been short-sighted.

The sincere analysis of one's own problems, particularly when accomplished through exchanges of ideas with others about their problems, leads at once to a broadening of horizons and the multiplication of experiences.

This approach to education is built upon the conviction that individual men and women desire to understand their troubles, that they can think and like to think, and that they prefer to be masters of their own fates. It is strongly supported by the findings of psychological experimentation into learning. We will think if we are actually invited to do so. This does not mean that all of us will become equally skilled in thinking or even that we will become fully conversant with the many complex issues our society faces. It does mean that we are capable of reflection and comprehension to the limit of the abilities we possess, and that in the absence of opportunity and practice in thinking for ourselves we lack also the chance to make better choices in our own living.

CAN NEW IDEAS BE IMPOSED ON PEOPLE?

Obviously, denunciation of people for their limited vision about their world is largely a waste of time. With the human tendency to depend upon and adhere to what they know, people will usually seek to repel in some fashion this direct challenge to their own self-respect. Denunciation changes little.

Also, dictation of ideas is largely wasteful. Most people resent being told what to do or think. Although action sometimes results from commands, there is evidence aplenty that people tend to revert to their own tried experiences when the discipline of force is relaxed. It is difficult to create permanent changes in thinking by command or external pressure unless the discipline surrounding the individual also restrains him from knowing and seeking to understand facts and ideas out of which he can build his own thinking habits.

Finally, the mere presentation of new information often falls short of accomplishing actual changes in our ideas, except insofar as we are able to give this new information support in the light of our own experiences, or except as we might use it as a means of escape from making our own decisions. The presentation of "facts" for the purpose of pleading with people and exhorting them is often a delusory substitute for their own thinking.

CAN WE ACHIEVE UNDERSTANDING THROUGH DISCUSSION?

To be effective, the methods we use in approaching our problems of world-living must meet four conditions: (1) they must be consistent with the democratic way of living, (2) they must be based upon fundamental faith in the ability of the individual to do his own thinking, (3) they must assume that few problems are so simple as to be expressed in terms of one "side" or the other, (4) they must imply that nothing short of complete understanding will suffice a thinking people.

Effective discussion by people in groups of their fellow citizens constitutes one means of achieving these conditions. Once the process of sharing opinions and experiences is started, learning begins to take

place. In discussion, a group of people rapidly pass through the steps of experience-sharing, problem analysis, seeking of new information, proposing tentative solutions, moving on to new problems. The individual's problem becomes the group problem, and his voice is not only allowed, but is demanded, in the councils of his peers.

The discussion group represents not only an effective learning device, but also a concrete example of democracy in action. It practices democracy in various ways:

In the first place, it gives importance to planning as a democratic instrument. When men think they begin to plan, to propose solutions, to test new ideas. In essence, democracy is planning; men and women do not prefer chaos or anarchy. As our forefathers planned a political state, so their descendants may plan their economy, their society, and their world. Above all, through discussion, planning becomes the right of people themselves--they depend upon no one person to plan for them.

Secondly, the usefulness of informational material--new facts--is given its rightful place in such groups; it is a tool rather than an end in itself. Instead of trying to listen to information indiscriminately dispensed, members of a discussion group first decide upon the type of information they need in order to solve their problems. This is in keeping with the purpose of informational material; a discussion group avoids the wastefulness of unplanned fact-giving.

HOW DO THE EXPERT, THE GROUP, AND THE LEADER FUNCTION IN DISCUSSION?

The importance of the expert--the specialist--is heightened and his usefulness enlarged through discussion. The authority of specialized knowledge is chiefly that of a resource available to groups who are making their own policies. Democracy does not assume that the expert shall become a group leader because he has specialized information within himself; in a discussion group his knowledge is used merely as a tool in thinking. Democracy likewise does not seem to assume that specialized expertness shall bring about a surrender of popular decision. The discussion group helps people to exploit the usefulness of expert knowledge in order that they may make better decisions. Leadership remains in the group.

Similarly, the effectiveness of group action is demonstrated through discussion. People in a democracy recognize the ineffectiveness of individual action in many situations; they accordingly form organizations to assist in giving them a hearing. The discussion group helps to insure that an organization continuously acts as the total voice composed of individual voices. People achieve a part in policy-making through discussion. Furthermore, the process of "talking things over" protects a group against voluntary or involuntary assumption of arbitrary authority by organization leaders. Action carries the weight of group decision.

Finally, as groups experiment in discussion, the importance of local leadership becomes clearer. To draw out the experiences of others, a leader must be familiar with those experiences. A leader who is ignorant of group

interests and problems is seldom able to lead that group effectively in discussion or guide them in their search for effective conclusions. This means that local group leaders, when trained in discussion procedures, represent one of the most necessary and effective tools in democratic education. Here is perhaps one of the richest resources of democracy: there is ample evidence that there exist in almost every community potential leaders who possess the qualifications required. Our past failure to discover them may have been due in part to our lack of insight into those qualities of leadership which make the achievement of democratic methods their goal.

CAN DISCUSSION STIMULATE THINKING?

We can be reasonably certain that men and women will not sense the problems of health, social injustice, economic maldistribution and ensuing international conflict now in our midst until they understand their causes. Argument and intellectual conflict seem as helpless in righting erroneous thinking as is military conflict in bringing peace.

Debates, radio addresses, forum speeches, reading--all contribute to enlightenment. Nothing reaches into the problems of people, however, more effectively than does discussion by a group itself if that discussion is so handled as to bring about continuously progressive thinking and the determination to use every available resource in understanding the issues we face.

As a people we will come to comprehend the problems of our nation and of our strife-torn world only as we talk about them, think about them, and make them our own. As a people we still have the chance to solve them, and the sun of democracy in the world will not have set until we prohibit discussion. A new world order will come as we, the people, set out to establish it. Our democracy needs the thinking of its people, and needs it badly.

As a people we have given little attention in the past to discussion as an instrument of education among ourselves. We have argued much, engaged in discussion too little. The more sensational instrumental values apparent in public addresses and vivid writing have often led us to believe in them as the most effective educational devices. Important as are these tools of thinking, we now know that the value of discussing our problems cannot be duplicated by some short-cut method. There is nothing more democratic than our own thinking, and thinking is vastly more than the mere choosing of alternatives.

DEMOCRACY REQUIRES THAT WE UNDERSTAND OUR PROBLEMS

That people shall comprehend the nature of their problems is more than a requirement for educational success--it is a basic principle of democracy itself.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS

1. Speak your mind freely.

The discussion meeting is yours—a chance for you to say what you think. Say it. Your ideas count. Here “everyone’s idea is worth just as much as everyone else’s, and a good bit more than some.”

2. Listen thoughtfully to others.

Try hard to get the other man’s point of view—see what experience and thinking it rests on. Remember: On almost every question there are three points of view—yours, mine, and the right one.

3. Keep your seat when you speak.

Whether you are group member or leader, don’t stand up to speak. The discussion meeting is not a place for speeches. Informality is the rule here.

4. Don’t monopolize the discussion.

Don’t speak for more than a minute or so at a time. Give others a chance. Dig for things that *matter*. Make your point in a few words, then pass the ball to someone across the circle. If discussion lags, help the leader put questions that will draw others out.

5. Don’t let the discussion get away from you.

If you don’t understand where it’s going, say so. Ask for examples, cases, illustrations until you *do* understand. Try to tie up what is being said with your own experience and with what you have heard and read.

6. Indulge in friendly disagreement.

When you find that you’re on the other side of the fence from the discussion, say so and tell why. But disagree in a *friendly* way. There’s one truth that everyone’s after. Good-humored discussion leads part way there.

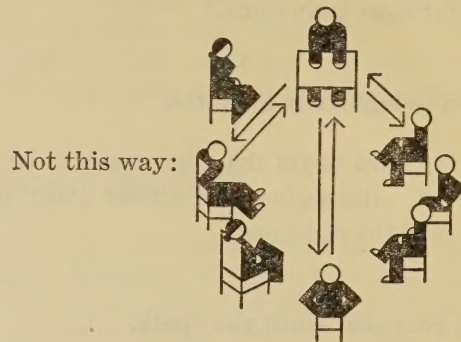
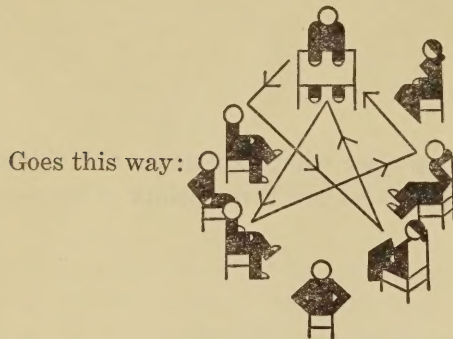
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7. Strike while the idea is hot.

Don't wait for the leader to recognize you before speaking. If several want to speak at once, it's his job to grant the floor to one, give the others a chance later. Your ideal discussion—



8. Come to the discussion with questions in mind.

Make note of questions and points of disagreement that occur to you during advance reading or listening, and raise them during the discussion. Farm papers, the daily press, lectures, public forums, the radio, etc., are good sources for clippings and notes to be used at discussion meetings.

9. Go ahead from discussion to study.

Remember that discussion is just the first step—an important one, but still just a starter. If your thinking is stirred up by the discussion here, seek out materials for further study on the problems. Ask your County Agricultural Agent, Home Demonstration Worker, or State Discussion Leader about reference materials. Call on them, too, for help in organizing a county-wide discussion movement, training leaders, etc.

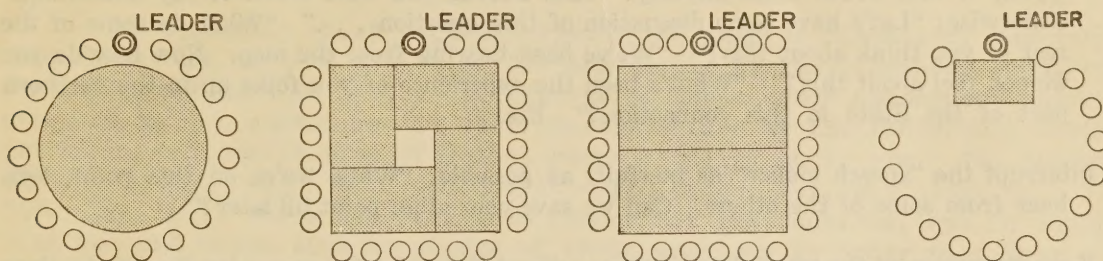
10. Why not group discussion at home?

All over the country farm men and women are gathering, often in farm homes, for discussion of public problems under local leaders. Some are using the best discussion and forum programs of the air as springboards for continuing discussion. Why not a neighborhood discussion group in your home?

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION LEADERS

GETTING READY

1. Arrange group in circle, so each person can see every other person.
2. Provide table space, if convenient, for leader and entire group, as e. g.:



3. Let all stay seated during discussion, including leader. Keep it informal.
4. Start by making everybody comfortable. Check ventilation and lighting.
5. See that everybody knows everybody else. At first gathering go 'round the circle, each introducing himself. As a newcomer joins group later, introduce yourself to him and him to the group.
6. Learn names of all as soon as you can.
7. Have blackboard, chalk, and eraser ready for use in case of need. Appoint a "blackboard secretary" if the subject-matter and occasion make it desirable.
8. Start on time, and close at prearranged time.
9. In opening, emphasize: *Everyone* is to take part. If one single member's view fails to get out in the open, insofar the discussion falls short.
10. Toward this, emphasize: *No speeches*, by leader or group member. No monopoly. After opening statement, limit individual contributions to a minute or so.

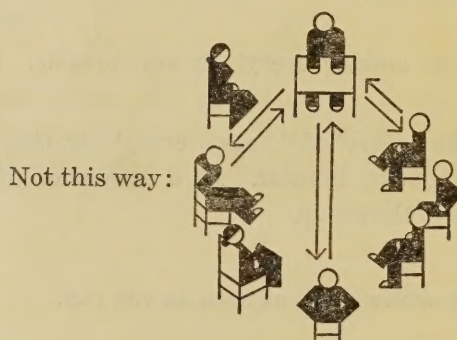
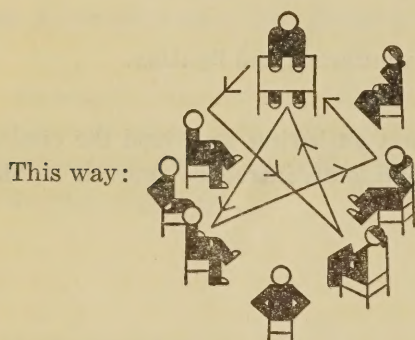
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CARRYING ON

1. Make your own preparation for the discussion. Think the question through in advance. Aim to establish connections between ideas of background materials, and experience and ideas of group-members.
2. Aim at outset to get a sharply defined question before the group. Have three or four alternatives put on board if you think this will help: "Which do you want to start with?" "Is this question clear?"
3. In general, don't put questions to particular group-members, unless you see that an idea is trying to find words there anyway: "Mrs. Brown, you were about to say something." Otherwise: "Let's have some discussion of this question . . ." "What do some of the rest of you think about this?" "We've been hearing from the men. Now how do you women feel about this?" "What's been the experience of you folks up in the northern part of the State in this connection?" Etc.
4. Interrupt the "speech maker" as tactfully as possible: "While we're on this point, let's hear from some of the others. Can we save your other point till later?"
5. Keep discussion on the track; keep it always directed, but let the group lay its own track to a large extent. Don't groove it narrowly yourself. Try to have it



6. Remember: The leader's opinion doesn't count in the discussion. Keep your own view out of it. Your job is to get the ideas of others out for an airing.
7. If you see that some important angle is being neglected, point it out: "Bill Jones was telling me last week that he thinks What do you think of that?"
8. Keep the spirits high. Encourage ease, informality, good humor. Let everybody have a good time. Foster *friendly* disagreement. Listen with respect and appreciation to all ideas, but stress what is important, and turn discussion away from what is not.
9. Take time every 10 minutes or so to draw the loose ends together: "Let's see where we've been going." Be as fair and accurate in summary as possible. Close discussion with summary—your own or the secretary's.
10. Call attention to unanswered questions for future study or for reference back to speakers. Nourish a desire in group members for continuing study and discussion through skillful closing summary.

To the people of America, democracy is a fundamental assumption of life. It is seen increasingly as a way of living founded upon the basic value of the individual himself, recognizing the potential growth of which he is capable. This belief that all men are potentially more than they have yet become means that our people have deliberately chosen a society which is built upon the future abilities of its individual members. It also means that our people set no limit to their capacities in creating and furthering newer and better ways of living.

In a society which rigidly rejects the idea of dictation, the very methods we use must be a part of the democratic vision. Methods required for democracy must be vastly different from those under autocracy--understanding by the common man is their basis, choice by the individual their practice, and realization of social responsibility their aim. The promise of actual achievement of a democratic world order lies, not alone in defeating those who would overthrow democratic institutions, but in equipping men and women with knowledge of their problems in order that they can attempt intelligent solutions.

HOW CAN WE USE DISCUSSION EFFECTIVELY?

The people around us daily face difficulties sprung from world issues, even though they may not be so aware. Problems of job, income, leisure time, attitudes, recreation--many more are of increasing concern to Americans as days pass. On such questions discussion is needed. Here will the full impact of international forces come to be comprehended, and herefrom will action be directed toward the achievement of world order.

To begin to discuss our problems and to get new information about them seems imperative. Leaders of organizations, rank and file citizens, program committees, educational advisers, and many others can take the initiative in getting together groups of people to share their thoughts with each other. The values in discussion are equally apparent in a town hall, in a public school, or in a farm or city living-room.

There are many brief descriptions of simple methods to use in starting discussion. Well-written materials on many of the problems people will discuss are available, often for the asking. If we learn how to approach people on their own terms, we shall usually find them waiting eagerly to share their thoughts. We can start democracy to functioning around us--and the number of people waiting to help us to do it is increasing. Discussion is vastly more than questions asked after a speaker has finished, more than "letting" a group talk; it is instead a drawing-out from the group of both the analysis of the problem and an estimate of possible solutions. The farmer and worker who sit down together to talk over their mutual troubles must exchange experiences, calling for expert help as they need it--they want understanding, not a lecture divorced from their own felt needs. The varying group interests in American life can come together to consider common problems. Leaders can be found in almost every community, but they will have to be trained for the task of guiding a group in its efforts to broaden its own intellectual horizons. Organizations can render a genuine service to their people by starting discussions on issues of world importance, and by training leaders who are sensitive to the needs people feel.

If they are to continue sharing in the promotion of democratic processes among the people, organizations and agencies will be faced with the task of constructing their educational programs through the usages of democracy as well as its verbiage. Can these programs rely upon that popular decision which may eventually spring from the intelligence of us who are the people? Can we who are Leaders employ the patience that accommodates our action to the measured pace of others' thinking? Does the use of premature "pressure" to achieve some predetermined result in thinking actually accomplish all that we claim, or does it delude us into a false sense of security about the ideas people hold? Granted that we have a responsibility to our people for using democratic methods, is it also possible that the way in which those people think and learn may cause them to force democracy upon us and upon themselves?

If a new world order is to be established, we the people will have to build it. We will also have to devise the methods required. Action will have to come from us, and the concept of democracy assumes that we will act when we understand our problems. In a day when we are subjected to a continuous flow of imposed stimulations designed to bring about some predetermined results in our opinions, the need for thinking becomes more pressing. These stimulations will exert their force upon us only as we fail to develop in their stead the habit of careful inquiry and healthy questioning about every phase of our living. The democracies of the world are being tested. Can they live by their own philosophy? Can they grow strong upon that ultimate expression of individual growth which they were organized to promote? Or is it important that they do?

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United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., The Division of Program Study and Discussion of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics publishes Suggestions for Discussion Group Leaders and Suggestions for Discussion Group Members, free on request.
